



“Two-faced -isms: racism at work and how race discourse shapes classtalk and gendertalk.”



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we relied on a mixed-methods approach to examine the contextual fluidities and nuances of racial discourse in a southwestern baked-goods workplace. Specifically, we extend upon previous findings on how stereotypes and slurs are racially unequal in a workplace setting, in order to investigate what is uniquely racist about the deployment of stereotypes and slurs and how racism shapes gendered and classed dimensions of these terms. Further, we empirically demonstrate how gender and class can be constructed along lines of racial ideology at micro-levels of interaction. Our argument is that racetalk does not operate independently or in isolation from other discourses like gendertalk and classtalk. Instead, racist comments are often expressed alongside classist and sexist comments by people, who simultaneously occupy multiple racial, class, and gender locations.

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In a world rife with racism, so much that it influences most every idea and practice, what ways does racial hierarchy become reproduced on an everyday basis, and how does it overlap and interact with other forms of inequality? Following [Bonilla-Silva \(1997:474\)](#), we define racism along structural and ideological lines as “...the segment of the ideological structure of a social system that crystallized racial notions and stereotypes...and provided the rationalizations for social, political, and economic interactions between the races.” In this manner, the content of racial ideology can be expressed in overt, covert, or inert terms ([Bonilla-Silva \[2003\] 2014](#); [Jackman 1994](#); [Picca and Feagin, 2007](#)), acquire relative autonomy in the social system (i.e., take on a life of its own), and fulfill a practical role in society (see [Wellman, 1993](#)) as it provides folks with a “common sense” way to understand and deal with racialized “others.” Similar to [Bonilla-Silva \(1997: 471–473\)](#), we presume that racism can shape social struggles based on class and gender, to varying degrees, because both these social categories are also racialized.

What remains empirically unclear, however, is how these processes are unraveled during everyday discourses in a contemporary context that is allegedly “post-racial” ([Cohen, 2008](#)) and in which some have argued that racism has all but disappeared ([D’Souza, 1995](#)). Among the ways to dispel these absurdities is to identify how stereotypes and slurs are emergent as words of power that deny rewards or confer penalties, of the material and symbolic variety, to racial groups in negotiating their social position ([Embrick, 2005](#); [Embrick and Henricks, 2013](#)). In this paper we demonstrate: (1) that racist discourse is so salient that it partially determines gender and class; (2) how language is differentially used in front-stage and back-stage contexts; and (3) ways in which back- and front-stage contexts differ according to the actors who participate in them.

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“Although general properties of language and discourse are not, as such, ideologically marked,” writes van Dijk (2006), “systematic discourse analysis offers powerful methods to study the structures and functions of underlying ideologies” (p. 115). A focus on systematized racetalk, particularly stereotypes and slurs, offers a window for discerning racism and seeing how it can, and often does, enact existing hierarchies of categorical inclusion/exclusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). A number of recent studies uncover how racial discourse occurs in the form of stereotypes and slurs, and how it coincides with other social categories. Croom (2011, 2013), for example, offers a discussion of how race- and sex-based slurs can represent a family resemblance conception of category membership—one that accounts for general meaning communicated by speakers with these slurs. Byrnes and Henricks (2014) examine a case study to show how middle-class blacks and whites utilize class conceptions of stereotypical etiquette to police boundaries of stigmatized blackness. And Henry et al. (2014) performed a couple of psychological experiments to show how slurs across a variety of social groups are more offensive when directed at lower-status groups. Our approach is unique, both in empirical and theoretical terms, from all these works.

Empirically speaking, the argument we advance is based in a systematic attempt to collect evidence and empirically scrutinize the key concept proposed at a micro-level¹ of interaction. Our approach is a sociological one that draws upon interviews and participant observation to probe social action as it occurs in a workplace setting. This differs from: 1) Croom (2011, 2013) who develops a theoretical argument that relies upon secondary data sources (primarily in linguistics and psychology) to provide a model for how slurs work; 2) Byrnes and Henricks (2014) who rely upon interview-based data to draw their conclusions; and 3) Henry et al. (2014) who depend upon an experimental methodology to determine which slurs are hypothetically most offensive. By contrast, our mixed-methods approach allows us to detect a number of contextual fluidities and nuances, which are discussed further below, that otherwise remain unobserved with other modes of theory development or data collection.

Theoretically speaking, the argument we advance builds off earlier work that takes a singular focus on how stereotypes and slurs are racially unequal in a workplace setting (Embrick, 2005; Embrick and Henricks, 2013). That is, “Slurs and stereotypes applied to whites by nonwhites do not carry the same *outcome* when these roles are swapped” (Embrick and Henricks, 2013: 198, emphasis original). Extending this point, we investigate what is uniquely racist about the deployment of stereotypes and slurs as well as how racism shapes gendered and classed dimensions of these terms. While race possesses independent features that are irreducible to any other social phenomenon (Omi and Winant 2014 [1994]), it does not exist in a vacuum isolated from gender and class. It is not that race merely coincides with gender and class, either, or that all these categories are mutually constitutive (Collins [1990] 2010), but that racism is so salient that it partially determines gender and class in their own right (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Of course structural arguments of gender and class can also make the same claim. That is, gender and class have the capacity to shape racism in its own right (c.f., Essed, 1991). The novelty of our argument, however, is not to contest a structural interpretation of gender or class. Rather it is to empirically demonstrate how gender and class can be constructed along lines of racial ideology at micro-levels of interaction.

1. Discourse in a racialized social systems framework

The racialized social systems framework, according to Bonilla-Silva (1997), explains racism as a global phenomenon that affected all societies that came into contact with European “whites.” Racialization of the world system was, and still is, based on social, economic, political, and psychological relations of domination and subordination between social groups defined as superior “races,” and groups defined as inferior “races” (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991). Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2001) argues that the racialization of the world created “racialized social systems” where the dominant race has developed various practices, relations, and mechanisms to maintain its social standing and subject racial groups have struggled to attempt to change their position in the social order. Racism has a material or structural foundation, that is, “racial” matters in societies reflect the interests of the parties in conflict. “[W]e can speak of racialized orders,” argues Bonilla-Silva (2001), “only when a racial discourse is accompanied by social relations of subordination and superordination among the races” (p. 42). This is because the everyday discursive medium of ideology is what crystallizes the racial structure. It is where commonly repeated views that rationalize how the world was, is, or could be—as well as where people are positioned within it—are articulated.

While much of our focus regards how dominance is exerted through racial discourse, it would be naïve to assume that racetalk operates in isolation from other discourses like gendertalk and classtalk. Instead, racist comments are often expressed alongside classist and sexist comments by people who simultaneously occupy multiple racial, class, and gender (and other) locations. People act according to the situation and who they are around, and they do not present consistent versions of self across situations (Goffman, 1956; Turner et al. 1987). Rather, people have fractured selves as they adapt their communication according to circumstances and audiences. These circumstances and audiences are themselves situated within a social web of asymmetrical relations of who can, and who does, have the power to impose meaning even when resistance is present (Blumer 1939, 1958; Blumer and Duster, 1980). Using acting as a metaphor for everyday life, Goffman (1956) draws from the old Shakespearean adage that the world is a stage and people are merely actors. Although Goffman did not attend to the raced, gendered, and classed dimensions of the self in great detail, we can expand upon the metaphor to

¹ We define “micro-level” as small-scale (i.e., microscopic) social phenomenon (e.g., individuals and their thoughts and actions; see C. W. Mills [1956] for further elaboration on this concept).

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